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Politics as a Profession in Nineteenth-Century Hungary?

Scientific literature generally maintains that the professionalization of politics is strongly tied to democratization (universal suffrage) and to the evolution of mass parties, and because of this supposed strong connection scholars have focused exclusively on the 20th century. In this paper I intend to call this conception into question. I would like to examine the previous period, because my opinion is that we can discover some clues and signs of the process of professionalization already in the 19th century.

Based on the first results of my long-term research I intend to draw a more sophisticated picture of the work of Hungarian politics in this period. Taking into account the questions and categories of professionalization theories, I examine politicians' activities considering five aspects. First, I offer a brief survey of the meaning of the word »politician« in the discourse of newspapers and pamphlets. Then the legal regulation of this vocation is analyzed on the basis of the laws and rules of the period after 1848. The next chapter focuses on the places and ways of acquiring special political knowledge. Afterwards the study follows the evolution of the collective identity of Hungarian representatives and finally, I describe the shaping of the self-concept and image of politicians.

The »Professional Politician« in Discourse

In Hungary the examination of modern political elites at the local, regional and national level could begin only after the regime change. This theme has been elaborated most extensively by Gabriella Ilonszki, who dealt with the problem in her two books and several studies.¹ She complemented the well-known categories of Max Weber with the typology and aspects of international research in order to describe the Hungarian way of professionalization during the 19th and 20th centuries. Although she and her colleagues examined the biographical data of many thousand Hungarian MPs, she could make only sweeping statements. According to the author the modern and professional politician appeared *en masse* in Hungarian politics only after 1990 – the fall of the communism – because of the belated democratization and formation of a party system. Before 1945 the Hungarian Parliament was dominated by notabilities from the traditional landowner-noble elite and political entrepreneurs (e.g. lawyers with extended social networks) in contrast with European tendencies.²

¹ Cf. G. ILONSKI, Belated Professionalization, 2004; IDEM, A modern politikus, 2005, IDEM, Képviselők és képviselet, 2009.

² To the European context: M. COTTA/H. BEST, Between Professionalization and Democratization, 2004.

In our opinion the strict application of modernization criteria masks some important changes. The »theory of backwardness« can be true within limits, but it does not say too much about the real process of the professionalization of Hungarian politics. In Hungary the second half of the 19th century was the age of the birth of the modern constitutional state, political culture and mass media, so we presume that these changes called forth a gradual metamorphosis of political life and of politicians' work. However, the nuances of this process could be detected by the method of discourse analysis rather than by a statistical examination.

The usage of the word »politician« has gone through a great diversity in meaning. According to the etymological dictionary this word appeared as a noun in 1751, but the adjectival form – with the ambivalent meanings: *polite* and *politic* – still remained in the Hungarian language for a long time.³ Although I could not do extensive discourse research, I browsed the digitalized articles of *Vasárnapi Ujság* [Sunday News], which was one of the most popular family-magazines in Hungary between 1854 and 1921 (like *Die Gartenlaube* in Germany) and thus could mirror the modifications of the common talk. This magazine first used the expression of »professional politicians« in 1898.

My results confirm the theory of Kari Palonen's book about the decline of gentleman-style politics.⁴ By the end of the century, the words politician and politics underwent a conceptual change, their meaning became more ambivalent. Most Hungarian texts depict the world of fin-de-siècle politics as a depreciation of political life, a moral failure and a diminishing of prestige. »As we know, the professional politician is an artist who labours not for himself, but for the social welfare,« says an article loftily about the common expectation.⁵ However, instead of some excellent statesmen, many selfish and short-sighted politicians governed the country – and lived »on« politics. Of course this unfavourable picture is also a kind of optical illusion of the pamphlets and articles, but these texts indeed contain some indirect evidence of the professionalization of politicians. In *Vasárnapi Ujság* we can often read the topos of the Hungarian people as lover of politics, since in this country everybody expertly explains political events. Moreover an article stated that in Hungary, preparing for a political career and regular political activity has long traditions in certain families.⁶

»The notion of the good politician and of the good MP is not totally equal. The difference between an excellent politician and a good MP is such as the difference between pioneers and developers of a science and the diligent servants of it. [...] A politician needs special talent and genius, but a good MP needs civic skills and virtue.«⁷

³ L. BENKŐ, *A magyar nyelv történeti-etimológiai szótára*, 1976, p. 244.

⁴ K. PALONEN, *Küzdelem az idővel*, 2009, 3rd chapter.

⁵ GYÖRGY GYURKOVICS, »Gróf Khuen-Héderváry Károly mint államférfi és mint ember« [Count Károly Khuen-Héderváry as Statesman and as a Man], in: *VASÁRNAPI UJSÁG*, 28.06.1903, p. 419.

⁶ SZÖLLÖSI ZSIGMOND, »Kor és idő« [Age and Time], in: *VASÁRNAPI UJSÁG*, 24.06.1917, p. 402.

⁷ »A képviselő« [The Member of Parliament], in: *VASÁRNAPI UJSÁG*, 27.3.1910, p. 273.

This text suggests that the professional politician has a facility originating from talent and instincts. His character and behaviour in public life are very different from others'. Professional politicians form a special group in the mass of MPs who practise politics as an avocation (part-time job). My conviction is that this transformation on the conceptual level indicates professionalization: by the second half of the nineteenth century a professional group emerged in the world of politics, in the way Max Weber described in his well-known lecture »Politics as a Vocation«⁸.

Legal Regulation

According to Hungarian laws (Act V of 1848, Act XXXIII of 1874) anyone, who had the right to vote and a clean record, was over 24 and spoke Hungarian, could become a politician. However, very few people could fulfill these criteria. Because of the high quotas, circa every fourth adult male (6% of the population) could vote during the whole examined period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy;⁹ only the wealthy could afford an expensive campaign and relatively few could speak Hungarian fluently in the multiethnic state. There were special rules, too, which distinguished politicians from other professions: e.g. incompatibility laws (Act I of 1875, Act XXIV of 1901) listed jobs, which a politician must not pursue. Right of immunity, protection by criminal law and the standing orders of Parliament defined such moral norms, which were applied only to the group of politicians. These laws and rules drew a line between MPs and society.

We can learn more about the process of professionalization if we analyze the evolution of the MPs' fee. The deputies had received a daily fee from their county during the sessions since the 17th century. After 1848 this system lived on, but this small MPs' income was now provided by the state budget. In 1893, considering increased official expenses (for travelling, rent etc.) and longer working time, the honorarium became higher and a fixed salary paid every three months replaced the daily fee. According to the official explanation of Act VI of 1893:

»Nowadays, the MP profession requires not only 3 or 4 months to be spent in the capital (as Ferenc Deák thought in 1848), but it requires 8–9 month to be spent in Budapest constantly, it is especially necessary for members of committees. Many people cannot make such a sacrifice, most of all scientific experts cannot afford it, whose participation in larger numbers in the legislation would be very desirable, in such a way that they can spend most of their time with this work.«¹⁰

⁸ M. WEBER, *Politik als Beruf*, 1919.

⁹ About the Hungarian electoral system in detail A. GERŐ, *The Hungarian Parliament*, 1997, pp. 27–55.

¹⁰ A pénzügyi bizottság jelentése az országgyűlési képviselők tiszteletdíjának átalányösszegben leendő megállapításáról szóló törvényjavaslat tárgyában. [Report of the Financial Committee of the House of Commons on the Bill of the MPs' Honorarium], Nr. 310. 7.1.1893, in: 1892. évi

Quasi-free, honorary service had come to an end. After 1893 the financial status of legislators improved: their honorarium was the closest to the salary of the deputy governors of the county administrations (*alispán* in Hungarian) and of the section leaders of the ministries. It was completed with a housing allowance and free travel tickets by the transport companies.¹¹

Hungarian laws did not deal with the qualification of the political elite. Although Act I of 1883 determined the employment requirements for clerks in central and local administrations and ordered qualifying exams for applicants, this law did not include any criteria for the appointment of state secretaries and ministers. Their appointment and resignation depended »only« on the confidence of the King, the Prime Minister and the governing party.

The unwritten norms and written laws sharply separated the political and administrative levels since new state secretaries and ministers had to get a mandate in the next election, but this same action was prohibited for lower officers by the incompatibility laws.

Special Knowledge

One of the most important aspects of professionalization theories concerns the question of expertise. Considering the elusive and enigmatic character of political knowledge, we cannot appoint a one and only school and curriculum needed for professional politicians, however examining the political careers helps us to determine typical institutions and skills.

For a young politician, the most important training place, inherited from past generations, was first of all his own family that governed political life at the local level. At the same time, the first forum for coming out was usually provided by the county or city council. Depending on their performances, family and the local elite selected youngsters for politics and this community planned their local or governmental careers.

A Hungarian historian, Károly Kecskeméti, could distinguish 25 parliamentary dynasties from 1790 to 1848 that consisted of three generations at least. These dynasties were often related to each other.¹² According to another calculation, during the Reform Age (1825–1848) there were 24 families supplying three or more deputies to the Diets.¹³ Moreover I could find at least 19 families between 1848 and 1892, which delegated six members of their family to the House of Commons: adding up to 154 politicians and 347 mandates. Scholars tend to regard the building of family networks as a nepotistic system, however, we should rather consider that the numbers mentioned

február hó 18-ára hirdetett országgyűlés képviselőházának irományai [Documents of the House of Commons at the 1892–1896 session of Parliament], vol. 9, Budapest, 1893, pp. 201–203.

¹¹ A. GERŐ, *The Hungarian Parliament*, 1997, pp. 120 f.

¹² K. KECSKEMÉTI, *Magyar liberalizmus*, 2008, p. 309.

¹³ B. PÁLMÁNY, *A reformkori magyar országgyűlések*, 2011, p. 47.

show that there was a professional group within the ruling class, which engaged in politics as a vocation.

Between 1825 and 1848, 52 politicians could participate in the work of the Diets for three or more legislations (so 11.5% of the deputies sat there during almost the whole Reform Age).¹⁴ According to Sándor Kurtán's study, between 1884 and 1910 there were 164 MPs who won six elections (5% of all MPs), and thus worked circa 25 or 30 years in the House of Commons (the number of long serving legislators was even higher, but we are not in possession of data from the earlier period).¹⁵

Considering another aspect we see that two-thirds of MPs had, at the turn of the century, a routine in public administration. While the governmental career became more frequent, party offices remained very rare among the MPs because of the slow development of the party system.

Hungarian MPs were highly educated by European comparison: 90 percent of MPs took a diploma and every third MP also could have gone abroad to study. Specifically, two-thirds of MPs had a law degree. In the eyes of the people the most important precondition of becoming a politician was the study of law. My opinion is that this phenomenon is due to three reasons. Firstly, strong (ancient) constitutionalism characterized political thinking and culture. The second reason was the slow differentiation of higher education. Finally, legal curriculum included political studies, statistics, economics, etc., which were necessary in the world of politics.

In Hungary until the last decades of 19th century a politician could make his most memorable hit with a brilliant oration, because MPs held long discussions about theoretical questions and wanted to convince each other in Parliament. However, after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, fevered decision-making and codifying started, so old fashioned theatrical orations were gradually replaced by speeches on special themes in a dry style. Of course not totally: eloquence was always profitable for a politician inside Parliament, and moreover outside of it, among the festive or protesting masses. (Standing orders prohibited the reading of speeches, therefore party fellows often had to give a prompt to each other.)

This rhetorical change took place in connection with the transformation of legislative work. Essentially at the end of the 1870s special committees became the most important forums of decision-making in Parliament, where parties delegated their veteran experts on a given problem. After 1867 first the financial, then the railway and educational standing committees were established. In 1875 twelve and in 1913 sixteen standing committees worked in the House of Commons (without ad hoc committees).

Mihály Táncsics, one of the few peasant-born legislators, could not succeed in political life because he did not have adequate knowledge for this profession. As a weaver he could not participate in the local council, he could not learn rhetoric, later

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁵ S. KURTÁN, *Az elit elitje*, 2005, pp. 53–55.

he had to give up his legal studies and of course his family socialisation was imperfect. He complained about this in his memoirs thusly:

»I grew up behind the plough where cores of diction were not scattered, in my young age when the soul is most sensitive for every nice and good thing, no famous teachers instilled in me artifices of oration, but heyduks [liveried attendants] standing behind me measured out the rules of hard work to my neck with their hazel-rods. I never frequented the conference tables of official rooms which is the school of oration.«¹⁶

Group Identity

In order to grasp the process of differentiation, I tried to examine the shaping of politicians' collective identity from the aspect of their relationship with other vocations in public life, e.g. journalist and lawyer. Unfortunately, Hungarian scientific literature has not yet analyzed this context in detail. However we know that by the end of the 19th century the distance between journalists and politicians increased. It is true that some famous writers and journalists sat henceforth in the House of Commons, but these exceptions prove the rule.

»About 20 years have gone by and literature and politics are not yet making a pair. [...] They have divorced and begin to look down on each other. Writer-politicians have died out, or rather there are writers in the Parliament, but they are reckoned as strange and eccentric beings.«¹⁷

These sentences were written in 1897 by a very popular writer and journalist, Kálmán Mikszáth, who recorded his reminiscences in several humorous sketches. For 23 years Mikszáth had been a legislator, but he took the floor no more than two times, rather he liked to make notes about the life of the House as a political outsider. According to statistics circa 15 to 20 journalists received mandates (from the total 413) in every election, but at the end of the 1870s, journalism began to separate from politics and journalists worked out their own ethical norms and founded an association to protect their interests. By the beginning of the 20th century journalism transformed from servant of politics to partner of politics, thanks to the financial independence of the mass media.¹⁸ In an all-round inquiry in 1908, journalist MPs already had to explain the compatibility of both professions; in fact, it became clear that party discipline and freedom of speech could be in conflict.¹⁹

Even though the professionalization of legal jobs had been completed by the end of the 19th century, the connection between politicians and lawyers remained the closest. Every fourth or third MP worked as a lawyer, in parallel with politics. Although the

¹⁶ M. TÁNCICS, *Életpályám*, 1949, p. 253.

¹⁷ K. MIKSZÁTH, *Irodalom és Politika*, 1992, p. 36.

¹⁸ G. BUZINKAY, *A haladás közvitézei*, 2000.

¹⁹ »Ha az újságíróból képviselő lesz« [If the journalist becomes legislator], in: BUDAPESTI ÚJSÁGÍRÓK ALMANACHJA, 1908, pp. 194–213.

European rate is 20 percent, the percentage of lawyers is higher in France; in Italy and England it is quite similar to the proportion in Hungary.²⁰ Criticizing this close relation, an author wrote as follows:

»In Hungary, the legal profession is the most solid basis for acquiring a public role and a political career. In our country, which is the classic example of the estate system, knowledge of law and of its labyrinth has a great importance. By the nature of their vocation, lawyers work permanently in the public life and they build connections with leader officers, so their name becomes widely well-known and they can look into the machine of politics. They exercise eloquence so they can easily learn the main requisites of the public role. Therefore a man desiring to make a political career must begin to work as a lawyer because this profession is the most profitable pre-school.«²¹

We cannot yet decide whether this relatively high percentage refers to the process of professionalization (as Max Weber thought) or is just a remembrance of the old world of politics.²²

Although the separation of neighbouring professions may not be perfect, we can speak about a strong and recognizable collective identity of politicians because of their own written and unwritten moral norms and behavioural rules. Among them I would mention first the articles of the party clubs:

»The aim of the Club is to provide a place for discussion for the MPs of the Liberal Party, and to be a centre of meeting, talking and relaxing for MPs and followers fostering cooperation and intensifying a sense of togetherness.«²³

Secondly, I would like to refer to the political rites, processes and ceremonies that strengthen group identity and mystify political life in the public eye. For example, Hungarian politicians had to be on familiar terms with each other regardless of their social backgrounds and party affiliations. Although *tegezés* [the familiar form of addressing people, using *te* and the appropriate verb forms]²⁴ originated from an old tradition of the nobility (approximately half of the representatives were noblemen) and at a time of a growing mania for titles,²⁵ this parliamentary norm helped to form the collective identity of the political elite. As some anecdotes show, *tegezés* was not always easy. For example, the new MP Miksa Falk, editor of the German-language newspaper *Pester Lloyd*, who was born in a poor Jewish family, did not want to use the familiar form of address with baron Pál Sennyey, but the conservative politician insisted on it on the grounds of parliamentary practice.²⁶ Vilmos Vázsonyi, the first MP represent-

²⁰ M. COTTA/H. BEST, *Between Professionalization and Democratization*, 2004, p. 501; G. ILONSKI, *Képviselők és képviselőlet*, 2009, p. 130.

²¹ P. SZENDE, *A magyar ügyvédség válsága*, 1912, pp. 194 f. See more details: M. M. KOVÁCS, *Liberal Professions*, 1994.

²² See G. ILONSKI, *Belated Professionalization*, 2004, p. 207.

²³ *Országos Szabadelvű Pártkör*, 1900, p. 2.

²⁴ *Té* is the Hungarian equivalent of *tu* (French) or *du* (German) instead of *ön*, *vous*/*Sie*.

²⁵ About the devaluation of titles and addresses: G. GYÁNI/GY. KÖVÉR/T. VALUCH, *Social History of Hungary*, 2004, pp. 134–137.

²⁶ M. FALK, *Kor- és jellemrajzok*, 1903, pp. 197 f.

ing the Hungarian Democratic Party was compelled to accept this norm at least seemingly, though he did not agree with it. He always tried to avoid the familiar form of address so that his colleagues would not perceive this linguistic trick.²⁷ (One can imagine how complicated and awkward that could be.)



Picture 1: Prime Minister Kálmán Tisza (right) and his supporters are playing Tarot in the Liberal Party Club.

Painting by Arthur Ferraris, 1894 [Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, Történelmi Képcsarnok].

Self-Concept and Image

Finally, the most exciting, but hardly answerable questions are: how was the politicians' self-concept formed? And how did their image change during the 19th century? Thinking in terms of liberalism, Hungarian politicians believed that they had to control and influence public opinion rather than obey its authority. They maintained that responsible decision-making could not depend on the changeable climate of opinion and they warned of the danger of the tyranny of masses. On the other hand they often referred to the people's will and derived their legitimacy from the sovereignty of the people. However, in the second half of the century the conservation of this dichotomy was not possible any more. Politicians accepted willy-nilly that they could not ignore

²⁷ V. VÁZSONYI, *Az én uram*, 1931, p. 101.

their image in public. In fact, as the public sphere got broader thanks to elementary schools and the mass media, so was the political elite more strictly controlled (despite the narrow suffrage). In the age of mass press, the shaping and protecting of one's reputation and favourable image became a political capital.

Governmental politicians organized social evenings, duty bound (*ex officio*) to maintain the dignity of their position. Depending on their habits they responded to the challenge of publicity in different ways. As Minister of Culture József Eötvös wrote in his diary:

»The hardest part of official life is not the amount of work, or the struggles and inconveniences that cannot be avoided by a minister, but the loss of so much time. The reception of people, whom we want nothing to do with, and formal visits, banquets, in brief: hundreds of unnecessary occasions that did not yield any results, however the honourable public accused us harder for missing them, than for the most serious official negligence.«²⁸

The austere Kálmán Tisza as Prime Minister avoided public events when he could, but domestic and foreign critics of his behaviour show that the social norms imposed on politicians were changing around the 1870s–1880s.²⁹ The next Prime Minister, Gyula Szapáry, was praised by the press because he felt bound to organize splendid parties not only for influential politicians, but also for the lower officers of the state administration.³⁰

Having acquired a profound knowledge of English and American political life while in exile, statesman Lajos Kossuth awoke to the importance of photographs perhaps sooner than his colleagues in Hungary: »I don't like the portrait-cult and I only sit for a photographer if I cannot avoid it. [...] However being in public life has its necessity. Whoever has lived such a life as mine, became everybody's prey.«³¹ Hungarian representatives published their biographies and had their photograph taken for distribution during their campaign. After plenary sessions many MPs corrected or sometimes re-wrote their speeches in stenographers' offices to shape a better image of their genius and skills in newspapers and in the official parliament diary. This fallacious image was depicted in a caricature showing the vain politician as a brilliant orator in a photo, although in reality he is sleeping on a backbench.³²

On the other hand politicians who protected their reputation intended to keep photographers away from the sessions of the Parliament. »We do not make a movie out of the Parliament!« said the Speaker of the House when awkward situations occurred

²⁸ J. EÖTVÖS, *Naplójegyzetek*, 1978, p. 401.

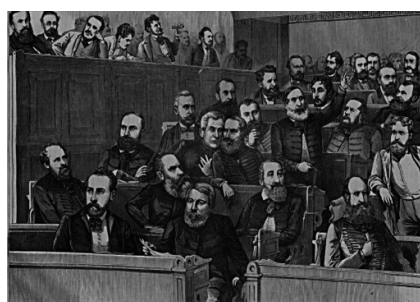
²⁹ E. ADAM, *A magyarok hazája*, 1885, pp. 107 and 122.

³⁰ »A miniszterelnöki palota« [The Prime Minister's Palace], in: *VASÁRNAPI UJSÁG*, 9.4.1899, pp. 237 f.

³¹ Letter of Lajos Kossuth to Károly László, 15.1.1868. *Magyar Országos Levéltár* [National Archives of Hungary] R 90. I. 4989.

³² JÁNOS JANKÓ, »Élet és fotográfia« [Life and Photograph], in: *HAZÁNK ÉS A KÜLFÖLD*, 5.12.1867, p. 784.

after photos of sleeping MPs or empty benches were made public.³³ Beside the political use of publicity, secrecy also became more frequent. At the turn of the century nearly one hundred journalists could work in the House on exciting or politically important days, therefore the management tried to ban journalists from visiting the inner places (e.g. restaurant, party corridors). Between 1905 and 1913 photos could not be taken of the plenary session because of the sharp conflict of the opposition and the governing parties. Although in 1913 photographers could record the opening of a sitting, they were prohibited from working during the debate on the restriction of the liberty of the press so they could not take photos of the battle of words and the entry of the parliamentary guards.



Picture 2: Opposition MPs and journalists (in the gallery) in the House of Commons.

Drawing by János Jankó, 1868, in: *Vasárnapi Ujság* [Sunday News], 29 November 1868.

In spite of every precaution, the judgement of parliament and the image of politics changed by the end of the 19th century. This means on the one hand the loss of prestige of the elite and of political institutions in connection with the general crisis of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, but on the other hand this transformation was caused by the professionalization of politics as well – and now this aspect is more important for us. From a place of discussion Parliament became a place of work: instead of during plenary sessions, decisions and laws were made behind closed doors in committees. Moreover, while plenary sessions resounded with scandals sparked off by the opposition, codification continued in the committees almost undisturbed (41 laws were passed per year).

»What can we see in our Parliament? An ordinary daily routine. As if the Body of Parliament did not have another task than mass law making. [...] Sometimes it happens that a bill causes a longer dispute, but during this dispute we cannot hear high thoughts, which would excite the Nation. [...] The curiosity of debates culminates in personal remarks and the giving up

³³ OSZKÁR BETHLEN, »Parlamenti fotográfiák« [Parliamentary Photographs], in: *VASÁRNAPI UJSÁG*, 9.II.1913, p. 891.

of principles, but if there are not such scenes, discussions are extremely prosaic and boring or, with a catchphrase, ›laudably objective‹.³⁴

Involuntarily, this critique characterizes the ambivalent situation very precisely. With the help of this text (a quote from a pamphlet) we can realize why contemporaries could speak about the Parliament simultaneously as a theatre, a circus (where the politicians intrigue) or as a law factory and a voting machine.

Conclusion

We tried to argue that the process of professionalization could be examined even in the case of an activity with very concrete temporal frames (as in parliamentary terms, governmental appointments) pursued by a strongly delimited, flexible professional group. Nevertheless, standard sociological concepts cannot be fully adapted to the situation as for example the strict and exclusive application of the Weberian categories masks changes, which are important, albeit difficult to measure.

The main conclusion of the paper consists in the statement that the professionalization of politics made good progress by the end of the 19th century and this process did not depend directly on democratization and the development of the party system. Considering the transformation of the world of politics in the 19th century the paper concludes that the difference (›lagging‹) between Hungary and Western Europe is not as great as it is portrayed in traditional scholarship. However, verification of all our statements and hypotheses needs further complex research.

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³⁴ BRENNUS, *A süllyedő társadalom*, 1889, p. 7.

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